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LEARNING IS CHILD'S PLAY

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The first years of children's lives strongly influence their future and particularly their performance in school. Numerous studies show that investing in early childhood care and education pays off, notably in developing countries. Nonetheless, efforts made to meet early childhood care needs are generally insufficient.

LEARNING IS CHILD'S PLAY

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Elementary school at Sampubangin village, Markham Valley.

It appears a priori that all conditions have been met for early childhood care and education to be the focus of attention from all sides. First, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, with its near universal adoption, has helped to shape early childhood policies. It's also the first goal of Education for All, taken on by the international community as an outcome of the 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar. We know, furthermore, that children's early years determine their future, notably their performance at school, as numerous studies have shown.

The best-known study on the subject is the High/Scope Perry Preschool programme, conducted in the United States between 1962 and 1967 and followed up at regular intervals since. The study examines the lives of 123 African Americans attending the preschool in Ypsilanti (Michigan), born in poverty and at high risk of failing in school. At ages 3 and 4, the subjects received a high-quality preschool program. They were then evaluated once a year until age 11, then several more times in the course of their later lives.

The results showed that they were more successful than the rest, as 65% of them finished high school, versus only 45% of those who did not participate in the programme. They also reported higher earnings (60% of them make more than US$20,000 annually, versus 40% in the other group). "Generally speaking, there is a very high return on investment. This is an important fact for poor countries to take into consideration," comments Nick Burnett, Director of the EFA Global Monitoring Report, whose 2007 edition coming out on 26 October focuses on early childhood education. Investing in early childhood is thus a key to reducing poverty.

Yet early childhood – meaning the period from birth until primary school age – is still treated as the poor relative in education. In almost half the countries in the world, no formal structure exists for early childhood education, and public spending in many cases remains paltry.

Poor relative

What donors give for early childhood education represents on the average 10% of what they give for primary school. Differences are marked among regions: prevalent in industrialized countries, pre-primary schooling reaches 62% in Latin America and the Caribbean, far ahead of South and West Asia (32%), the Arab States (16%) or Sub-Saharan Africa (12%). (Source: 2007 EFA Global Monitoring Report)

These figures require further interpretation, because one characteristic of early childhood education is not relying entirely on educational institutions. "Contrary to what happens in the primary and secondary sectors, it involves actors in the informal system, such as families and communities," explains Hye-Jin Park of the UNESCO Basic

Education Division. While in Europe we consider that the state has a legitimate role, this is not the case in other regions. Some countries consider early childhood to be entirely the responsibility of private initiative. "There is no general consensus on what domain is the state's and what is the family's," says Burnett.

Learning to live in society

"In fact, it's not easy to define what is good for children," adds Anne-Marie Chartier, teacher and researcher on the history of education in Paris. A recent example: the debate in France between teachers and child psychiatrists on whether children should start school at two years old. The issue is

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all the more controversial because early childhood education concerns not only education, but also nutrition, health and cognitive development. "What you learn at that age," says Pepa Del Val, teacher at Our Lady Of Wisdom School in Madrid, "is of course to hold a pencil, but it's more about sharing and respecting others – becoming little people who can live in a society."

Over time, early childhood care and education is making progress almost everywhere in the world: preschool attendance has tripled since 1970. "More and more women want to work. This trend, along with the decline of the traditional role of the family, increases the demand," explains Burnett. Nonetheless, the children who stand to benefit from early learning opportunities are those most likely to be excluded. Good quality programmes have the potential to advance children's rights and make a dent into staggering figures of deprivation: even today 10.5 million children in the world die of avoidable diseases before the age of five.

Agnès Bardon.

95% of children aged 4 and 5 and 60% of 3-year-olds in Jamaica participate in Early Childhood Care and Education. The Roving Caregivers Programme is concentrating on reaching kids who are under three and from the most disadvantaged and rural areas.

JAMAICA
A SMILE MAKES IT WORTHWHILE

A dynamic woman clad in purple stands in the yard of a small house located in the hilly interior of the Mocho Mountains in Clarendon Parish, Jamaica and leads four toddlers and their parents in a ring game. Melonie Chambers chose the rings because they improve motor coordination and teach the children about their body parts. As the children play, she encourages

"Playing is the foundation of learning," says Melonie Chambers, a "Rover" with the Jamaican Roving Caregivers Programme.

© UNESCO/Gary Masters

the Jamaican Roving Caregivers Programme (RCP) is a development project for little childhood in rural parish.

them to use common courtesies like "thank you" and "sorry". The children's laughter and cheers ring through the air.

"For now, the ring game is a way to use up the children's energy. When they are older they will be able to participate even more" Melonie explains to the parents. "Playing is the foundation of learning," she adds.

Melonie is a "Rover" with the Jamaican Roving Caregivers Programme (RCP), a community-based early childhood development programme administered by an NGO called the Rural Family Support Organization (RuFamSo).

After playing in the sun, it is time to go on the veranda of the wooden structure. Melonie and the children sing a song as they wash the dirt off of their hands. "We tried to teach the children and their parents about proper hygiene," whispers a Rovers' project officer who has come to the field to observe Melonie today.

Giving back to the community

Early Childhood Care and Education has a long-standing tradition in Jamaica, with 95% participation rates for four- and five-year-olds and around 60% for three-year-olds.

Rovers like Melonie, are caregivers who come from the poor, rural communities that they serve. The name "Rover" stems from the fact that they travel from home to home. Each Rover is responsible for approximately thirty families, who are visited for 30 to 45 minutes several times per week.

Early Childhood Care and Education has a long-standing tradition in Jamaica, with 95% participation rates for four- and five-year-olds and around 60% for three-year-olds. National efforts are now focusing on better access for children under three and those from the poorest families and most disadvantaged and rural areas.

RCP fits within Jamaica's priorities. It focuses on improving the development, health and nutrition of children aged 0-3, promoting their parents' self-esteem and child-rearing knowledge, and assisting with income-generating activities for the community. All told, 14,255 parents and 22,335 children in three rural parishes have been served since the programme began in 1992.

Early Childhood Care and Education has a long-standing tradition in Jamaica, with 95% participation rates or four- and five-year-olds and around 60% for three-year-olds.

Melonie has been working in this particular community for a few months now and says that the growth that she has noticed in both parents and children is worth the over 50 miles she travels daily for her sessions. "The parents and children are so good, energetic and enthused," she says. "I love being around the children, doing this kind of work is my passion."

The lessons the parents learn are far-reaching. "Rovers go into the homes to work with infants and parents, but there is a ripple effect to other children," says Utealia Burrell, Director of the programme.

It's worth the challenges

It is not only the children and families who benefit, but the Rovers as well. While Rovers are all secondary school graduates, many were previously unemployed. To prepare for their role, they receive regular training and are periodically supervised in the field by project officers. They are not only paid for their work, but it also often leads to further education and even professional certification. Melonie is currently training in Early Childhood Education at HEART NTA, a national vocational institution. "We even have some parents who–once they successfully complete the programme–go on to become Rovers themselves," says Burrell. "Having been in the programme, they understand the experiences of parents in the community."

Evaluations carried out by UNICEF and the Bernard van Leer Foundation demonstrate that RCP is a good investment. The program has now been successfully replicated in four other Caribbean countries: Dominica, Grenada, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Burrell has recently presented the programme in Africa and hopes that it can be replicated there too.

The Jamaica Roving Caregivers Programme is not without its share of challenges. "Some parents were sceptical at first, saying that the child is too young to learn," explains Melonie. "However, after about three months with the programme these parents said their child was responding to their voices, and some could identify shapes."

Jasanth Bell, 41, a new mother in the programme, echoes Melonie's enthusiasm. "I enjoy being with programme. You learn to treat the children with respect and lots of love… how to tell the children mommy loves you," she smiles. She continues, "The baby is 5 months now, so I have a long way to go."

"Seeing the positive impact you have on a child's life makes the distance I travel shorter," Melonie says. "I look forward to coming to work, I don't mind the sun…just their smiles make it worthwhile."»

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The Jamaican Roving Caregivers Programme teaches proper hygiene notions to children.

Damion Radcliff,
in Kingston.

Two years ago, Luz Marina Mahecha started a new job at home: she looks after children while their mothers are at work. In Colombia, more than 80,000 community mothers like Luz provide this kind of children's daycare service.

DAYCARE IN COLOMBIA

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Children in Bogota.

Dawn, just breaking over the mountains south of Bogota, illuminates the Ciudad Bolivar community. Luz Marina is already up. She has to take care of 13 children, but they are not her own. They are the children of her neighbours in the Caracoli district, left with her so their mothers can go to work. In Caracoli, only one out of three adults has a legal job and the number of inhabitants is growing daily, due to the influx of displaced populations fleeing the rural areas, their paramilitary groups and guerrilla warfare.

Luz Marina hasn't turned forty yet. She decided two years ago to give up her dressmaker and shop assistant activities and devote herself entirely to the role of "community mother". When she did, she became part of a project initiated 20 years ago by the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare, which organizes daycare for more than a million children. It keeps them off the streets and offers them an alternative to staying at home alone while their parents are out.

Some 5000 community mothers, like Luz Marina, provide this kind of daycare in the Colombian capital; throughout the country they number nearly 82,000. A study of adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17, conducted in Colombia by the 2007 Education for All Global Monitoring Report, revealed that children who benefit from such daycare are more likely to be in school and less likely to repeat a year.

A new job, a new way of life

"When I got an offer to work with the Institute of Family Welfare, I immediately accepted. But I had to adapt my life and my house to the new situation," says the young woman, her round cheeks ruddy from Bogota's chilly mountain air. At the time, Luz Marina and her husband, a construction worker, lived in a house built of brick and corrugated metal. They had to transform the living and dining rooms into a kindergarten. They painted the walls of the two rooms, the only coloured ones in the house. They also added red colouring to cement, to make surfaces look like terracotta. A sign hangs outside, on which is written the name of the daycare centre: "My little friends".

Taking care of children has given Luz Marina steady employment, and in her own home. She is spared a daily commute of two hours on the bus to get to work. Furthermore, she receives a stipend of 185,000 pesos ($77) per month, on top of the parents' fees, ranging from $3 to $5. The Institute also gives her a certain sum to buy food and supplies.

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Luz Marina Mahecha is one of the 80 000 community mothers who provide children daycare service in Colombia.

"At the end of the day, I'm exhausted. It's not easy looking after children of different ages. The smallest one, Sharon, walks, goes to the toilet by herself, and talks…a lot," explains Luz Marina with a smile.

More than babysitting

"By the grace of God, I've become another person from being in contact with these children. I'm not simply babysitting for a neighbour's child - they're like my children now. I play with them, they make me laugh, they tell me what's going on at home, with their families….They teach us so much if we make the effort to listen to them."

A typical day: the children arrive, wash their hands and eat some "bienestarina", a powder the government distributes to prevent malnutrition, containing milk and other nourishing ingredients. At about 9.30 a.m., activities begin. "We sing, we play and we do exercises. At about 11, we go have lunch." Then, after a little nap, more activities, either outside in the garden if the weather is nice or inside if it's raining. "Occasionally we watch some television, usually educational programmes for kids." And every so often a priest comes to visit the children and teach them catechism.

Even getting up at dawn does not faze Luz Marina: "I would like these little ones to learn professional skills. One day, later, I would like them to remember me as someone who did something for them - as some kind of teacher."

Henry Orrego,
in Bogota.

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Luz Marina Mahecha had to adapt her home to children's activities.

For the past ten years, a project has been helping parents in Jordan's rural and underprivileged regions. Until now it focused mainly on mothers, but fathers have begun to participate, brought in by way of religion.

JORDAN
FATHERS INCLUDED

© UNESCO/Mustafa R. Mohammad Daras

Discussion among trainers.

Eight o'clock in the morning. Samira Darwish is getting ready for her weekly get-together with neighbourhood women. We are in Abu Dhar Al Ghafaari, in the Palestinian refugee camp of Marka, north of the Jordanian capital. Like many other camps that materialized because refugees were flooding into the country in 1948 and 1967, Marka at the beginning was simply a collection of canvas tents donated by the United Nations. As time passed, tents were replaced by rough shacks, piled one against the other. Comfort is rudimentary at best. Unemployment, poverty and overpopulation have prevailed in the camps for as long as three generations.

Smira grew up in the neighbourhood. That is why she is accepted easily, despite her young age. At the development centre's headquarters in Abu Dhar Al Ghafaari, a dozen women are sitting around the table. The topic of the day: the custom, which is still popular in the camp, of coating babies' skin with salt to make them more robust. The heat is oppressive, but Samira's smile never wavers. She explains that not only is the practice useless for increasing a baby's vitality, it can even cause dehydration. A little later, she advises mothers never to use tap water, which in the camp is not fit for drinking, to cool off their baby bottles.

Glaring disparities

Samira is a trainer for the Better Parenting Initiative, launched by UNICEF in 1996 with the support of several Jordanian ministries (health, education, social development and religious affairs), the UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency)

A global strategy for early childhood development

Jordan's strategy includes legislation pertaining to the health of pregnant women and children, the role of the family and the quality of daycare centres. The goal is to pay more attention to children by creating kindergartens in remote or less privileged areas and providing daily meals and warm clothing to children who need them. The project aims to raise the number of four-year-old children in school from 28% to 35% by 2008, and to 50% by 2013.

© UNESCO/Mustafa R. Mohammad Daras

Trainer Samira with a amily in the Marka Camp located in the north of the Jordan capital.

for Palestine refugees, and the Noor al Hussein Foundation. Based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the project encourages families in rural or underprivileged areas to acquire sound parenting skills from pregnancy on through early childhood. Recent studies in the country have indeed revealed glaring disparities in the care given to children under the age of three. In ten years, nearly 45,000 parents have benefited from the project and 1500 professionals have been trained.

Fathers too

Several times a week, at meetings like the ones organized by Samira, the group discusses such topics as weaning, the importance of communicating with children, or ways to identify possible developmental problems. Sessions are led by professionals – teachers, doctors, social workers or nurses – who receive training.

At the beginning, the project focused almost entirely on mothers. No more. Now 37% of the trainers are men, with 63% women. The only difference is that men get involved through their religious practice. The men's sessions are held in certain mosques following Friday prayers, with the imam's blessing.

"The number of male trainers is slowly growing," observes Suzanne Salihi, deputy chief of the Better Parenting Initiative in UNICEF's Amman office. She stresses the importance and impact of the training that takes place in the mosques. The project has produced a handbook about early childhood development for imams, and already 30 imams are participating. It's a first step. "It still remains much more difficult to make contact with the men than with the women" adds Suzanne. "You have to push aside certain taboos, explain that playing with the child is not just for mothers, and changing a baby's nappies is not degrading. This is not always self-evident."

Yet the effort seems to be paying off. Samy, a trainer in the Marka camp, sees concrete results: "Some of the people who trained with me have changed their attitude towards their children.

Adjnadine Samran,
in Amman.

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Homework session.

For the last 20 years, in certain districts of Ireland's capital, the Community Mothers Programme has been working with women who have just given birth to their first child. The innovation: experienced local mothers are the ones giving guidance to the beginners.

IRELAND
MOTHERS TALKING TO MOTHERS

© Niamh Burke/UNESCO

It's a good beginning for this Irish boy.

Not long ago, the district of Ballymun was just a series of dingy gray buildings bristling with television aerials, their stairwells splattered with graffiti. Unemployment and drugs were endemic. In the last few years, however, the impact of the "Celtic Tiger" economic boom has transformed even this working-class area, located some five kilometers from downtown Dublin. Little by little, the blocks of buildings were torn down and their occupants moved into cozy little houses. Even a luxury hotel has materialized and others are in construction. An unthinkable possibility eight years ago, when the Community Mothers Programme (CMP) implanted itself in the area.

Launched at the beginning of the 1980s, the CMP helps mothers who are giving birth to their first child to get off to a good start. It operates mainly in the less privileged parts of the city. The Programme is offered to all first-time mothers; choosing to participate or not is up to them. But in neighbourhoods like Ballymun, nearly 80% sign up. In 2005, more than 50% of the women enrolled in the Programme were single mothers and close to 10% were teenagers.

Discussions over coffee

Similar programmes exist, notably in the United Kingdom. What makes the CMP different is that it is run not by social workers or nurses but by mothers from the community, selected and trained by the Programme. They are volunteers, receiving only a small stipend to cover transportation. Once a month, over a period of two years, they visit the families. Casually, over a cup of coffee, they chat with the child's mother about the little one's progress or possible difficulties. "It's working because it has one foot in formal education system and the other in non formal learning. The idea is for the parents to feel, at the end, like experts on their own children," says Brenda Molloy, head of the Programme. Not putting health workers on the front line helps greatly in winning the trust of the young mothers. "The get-togethers are very informal. You feel very comfortable talking," says Antoinette, mother of 4-month-old Tadhg.

Jean, 38, is lively, chatty and bursting with energy. She took advantage of the Programme when her first child was born, 12 years ago. Now she has become one of the visiting mothers in

© Niamh Burke/UNESCO

A mother attending Community Mothers programme with her referring nurse.

Ballymun. "We're not there to impose anything on the mothers, we're there to answer any questions they might have," she explains. "For instance, is it normal that my child does this, or that he isn't like that? We rely on our experience and common sense. And if there's something we don't know, we ask one of the Programme nurses."

Measurable results

Another resource for visiting mothers is the documentation provided by the health services. With the help of diagrams, it explains why it is a good idea to speak lovingly to your baby, hold him in your arms, get him his vaccinations, and not give him too many sweets. "Really, these are things that seem obvious, but they're not necessarily obvious if they weren't passed on to you. I didn't know, for instance, that it was so important to read stories to your children," confides Siobhan, another Programme graduate who has now become one of the visiting mothers in Ballymun. As soon as a child is nine months old, therefore, mothers are encouraged to join the nearest library.

The CMP employs a dozen nurses and works with nearly 1200 mothers with an annual budget of 800,000 Euros. The results are already measurable. In 1990, the Bernard van Leer Foundation conducted a study with 232 women who were first-time mothers. Of those who had been involved in the Programme, 98% read stories to their children, versus only 54% of the others. Seven years later, a follow-up study with one third of the same women revealed that 50% of the Programme graduates were against slapping as an educational method, versus less than 25% among the others. "CMP" mothers are also more likely to supervise their child's homework, limit time spent in front of the television, serve varied meals and take their children to the dentist. "It doesn't seem like very much," emphasizes Brenda Molloy, "but those few hours spent with the mothers can make all the difference."

Agnes Bardon,
in Dublin.

© Niamh Burke/UNESCO

The idea is for the parents to feel, at the end, like experts on their own children.

Young children in a rural Kenyan community thrive thanks to "Loipi" community learning centres that are culturally adapted to their needs.

PLAYING UNDER THE FIG TREES IN KENYA

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Samburu children.

"Loipi" means shade in the language of the Samburu, traditional pastoralists who live in northern Kenya. In this hot, arid land, the precious area under the shade of trees plays an important role in people's lives. Samburu men make community decisions in the shade of a tree specifically designated as the site of the council. And grandmothers, the time-honoured caregivers of Samburu children, traditionally feed the community's cherished youngest members, teach them songs and tell them folk tales in a shady space under a large tree.

Appropriately, the word associated with shade and gathering in Samburu now also refers to a culturally-friendly educational initiative that ensures children are prepared for formal schooling. As participants in the Loipi Project, part of Kenya's nationwide Early Childhood Care and Education programme (see box), Samburu children spend their days in communal enclosures called Loipi, playing and learning under fig trees with other children their age.

"They grow up socializing instead of in isolation," says Mariam Lapukuyum, mother of six children. "We cannot assure a school education in the city (Nairobi), but at the centres they are given a good foundation about life and everything they may do when they grow up." Adds another mother, Wilkister Murairu, "They are being taught things we never had the opportunity to learn."

"We cannot assure a school education in the city (Nairobi), but at the centres they are given a good foundation about life and everything they may do when they grow up," says Mariam Lapukuyum, mother of six children.

There at least 85 Loipi in the sprawling Samburu district, and children from different communities gather at the closest one. In keeping with the project's non-intrusive approach and emphasis on tapping community resources, most materials used in the Loipi are locally made and produced and caregivers include mothers, grandmothers and other community members. The programme is designed for children up to the

© Flickr/Markus Paminger

Samburu National Reserve.

age of four, after which they are encouraged to enroll in pre-school, if there is one. If not, activities for older children are incorporated into the Loipi.

At one Loipi near the district headquarters of Maralal, about 280 kilometres (175 miles) north of the capital, children listen to stories about humanity's origins. They learn to wash their hands before eating. They sing, guess riddles and play football with cheap plastic balls. Lessons are given using familiar objects - balls, pebbles, bottle tops and sticks. As one trainer explains, "At this stage, it's rather complicated to use books. We teach using what the children like playing with. Unlike children raised in urban areas, they have no access to modern toys or Disney cartoons."

Games and other activities blend modern techniques to stimulate learning with traditional child-rearing practices. "We let the children play, rest or sleep," says Maria Kibasia, a centre volunteer. Adds instructor Martin Olanga with a smile, "We let them cry. We give them the freedom to understand life from a very young age." Olanga was trained in government-sponsored early-childhood education seminars, during which, he says, teachers learn how to motivate a child's "delicate mind": "You let it do what it wants, but in a guided and safe way."

The Loipi children also receive other benefits, such as basic medical treatment and immunizations. On those days, parents are encouraged to come in with their children to learn about health, hygiene and development. "For example, if a child needs to take medicine outside centre-hours, you must work with the parents," says Kibasia. "Parents are becoming increasingly cooperative, especially about the children's health. This is encouraging."

Improving chances for a brighter future

The results of the Loipi project are encouraging in many respects. First and foremost, "It helps children develop communication skills, improve their social skills and develop physically," said Gilbert Momanyi, a sociology lecturer at the University of Nairobi. In addition, the kids also learn about clean water, food security, hygiene and communal values. These integrated interventions benefit an estimated 27,000 children and their families in Samburu district, according to a recent study entitled "Influencing and Developing Good Policy in Early Childhood Development (ECD) among Pastoralist Communities in East Africa." As a result, though they belong to one of the poorest communities in Kenya, 54 percent of Samburu children are enrolled in pre-school compared to a national average of 45 percent.

Rooted in the community, the Loipi project also empowers it, as centres become focal points for nutrition, health and wider community education. Joseph Mwaura, a local administrator, describes how the centres create links to helpful NGOs, maintain children's medical records and have gained government approval and support. The education ministry helps with educational materials and teachers; the health ministry supplies vaccines and medicines. And no wonder, says a Kenyan education ministry official: "Talk about killing several birds with one stone. Who wouldn't want to support that project, which makes life so much easier?"

The goal now is to extend the project to other countries facing similar challenges, where traditional nomadic pastoralist communities are in transition to sedentary settlement. According to Oxfam's 2005 statistics, between 25 and 40 million school-age children in the world live in nomadic pastoralist societies, and only 10 to 50% attend school. The Loipi model is now being implemented in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Namibia.

Bogonko Bosire,
in Nairobi.

Localizing Early Childhood Education

In Kenya, an experimental programme for Early Childhood Education started in the early 1970s with teacher training and curriculum development. The government established the project on national level in 1983, with support from the Dutch Bernard van Leer Foundation, which specializes in early childhood education programmes.

In the 1980s the state-run Kenya Institute of Education and the Christian Children Fund (CCF) formed a partnership to improve the lifestyle in the Samburu region, which sits in the dustbowl of Kenya.

In 1995, experts came to the Samburu district and carried out a study on child rearing practices among the community called "Influencing and Developing Good Policy in Early Childhood Development (ECD) among Pastoralist Communities in East Africa." The main reason for the study, experts say, was to revive and enhance child rearing practices that had been strained by hardship, poverty and inter-tribe wars.

"This led to a completely new atmosphere with the parents and communities, because the study directly involved them and drew on their knowledge and experience for the first time," Tanja van de Linde said in the study. Now, for example, children are taught in their mother tongue in the Loipi.

In a country with over 800 different languages, children in Papua New Guinea can begin their learning experience in their mother-tongue.

A RECIPE FOR SUCCESS IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

© UNESCO/Rocky Roe

Hagara Elementary in Port Moresby (Hanuabada).

Barbara Mea teaches in Hanuabada, a village in Port Moresby, capital of Papua New Guinea (PNG). The urban community, not far from the modern city centre, is mainly indigenous Motuan and its typical houses are built on stilts above the water. Each day, Barbara walks into her preschool level class at the Hagara Elementary School to be greeted by 35 children speaking to her in Motu. It's their mother tongue, just one – out of over 800 - of the small island nation's astonishing array of indigenous languages. And even though English has traditionally dominated the PNG school system, Barbara teaches all her subjects - including language, counting, colors and shapes, culture and community living - in Motu.

"In the language class," says Barbara, "we teach children to read and write in Motu. Through the influence of early missionaries, we already have translations of the Bible and of Methodist hymns, and now there are also other books in Motu." To get to know their culture, her pupils study the unusual Motuan calendar, which has 13 months instead of the Western calendar's 12. "Children discover that in Motuan custom, the month determines the people's communal activities," she continues. "For example, in the early part of the year, they plant their gardens. Around September, most of the cultural activities take place, so we teach children about the different types of dances performed when people are celebrating."

The same preschool programme, required by the Ministry of Education and designed to provide children with two years of basic education in their vernacular language before they enter primary school, exists throughout the country. Fred Ngansia, a teacher in Umbukul, rural village on New Hanover Island, New Ireland Province, divides his time between giving his pupils lessons in Tungag, the local language spoken by about 20,000 people, and instructing them in the ancestral life-style, including protecting the reefs that provide the community with fish and other marine resources.

A recipe for success

It's a winning formula. Children achieve literacy in their mother tongue, explore the ancient traditions and develop their sense of identity. At the same time, experts have noted, they make the developmental, cognitive and academic progress necessary to succeed

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Hagara Elementary in Port Moresby (Hanuabada).

in school. As Barbara Mea explains, "When children first arrive at school, they often feel lost. They've picked up the language within their own families - the formal setting and structured learning are new and unfamiliar. But by their third year, when they start primary school and begin to learn English, the basic skills they've acquired enable them to grasp it more quickly."

Proving her point are children like eight-year-old Michael, of mixed parentage like thousands of his compatriots. His mother Stephanie Malun is Motuan, his father comes from Pidgin-speaking Manus. "Michael has learned Motu and Pidgin and is starting English," testifies Stephanie. "He can speak all three languages quite well."

That's the idea. English is one of PNG's three official languages – along with Motu and Pidgin - but it's a first language for only 50,000 people. With an estimated 823 languages still spoken by a population of some 5.5 million and widespread multilingualism, PNG is the country with the greatest linguistic diversity in the world. It intends to keep that distinction. This is one developing country determined to preserve its cultural and linguistic uniqueness. One significant strategy is including vernacular languages in the formal education system.

Scaling up multilingual education nationally

Yet PNG's bilingual education policies are relatively recent. From 1870 on, the first mission schools in PNG used the vernacular languages, but an English-only policy was adopted in the 1950s. Reviewed at independence in 1975, it was maintained under the 1976 Education Act.

Then, in 1979, it wasn't the government that launched vernacular preschool education, it was a group of parents on Bougainville Island in North Solomons Province, out of concern that their children were losing their language and culture. The community-based Viles Tok Ples Skul (VTPS) ("village language school") scheme was developed, later known as Tok Ples Pri Skul (TPPS) ("vernacular language preschools"). With local funds and the help of NGOs, it quickly spread throughout the country. Finally, the programme was incorporated in the 1995 government Education Reform and is now the responsibility of the national formal education system.

Having operated non-formally for more than 15 years, the programme still leaves room for improvisation. Fred, for instance, learned to teach simply by observing more experienced teachers. "The most important thing," he says, "is that I grew up in the village and went to school here before high school. So I know our way of life and our language."

Oseah Philemon
in Port-Moresby.

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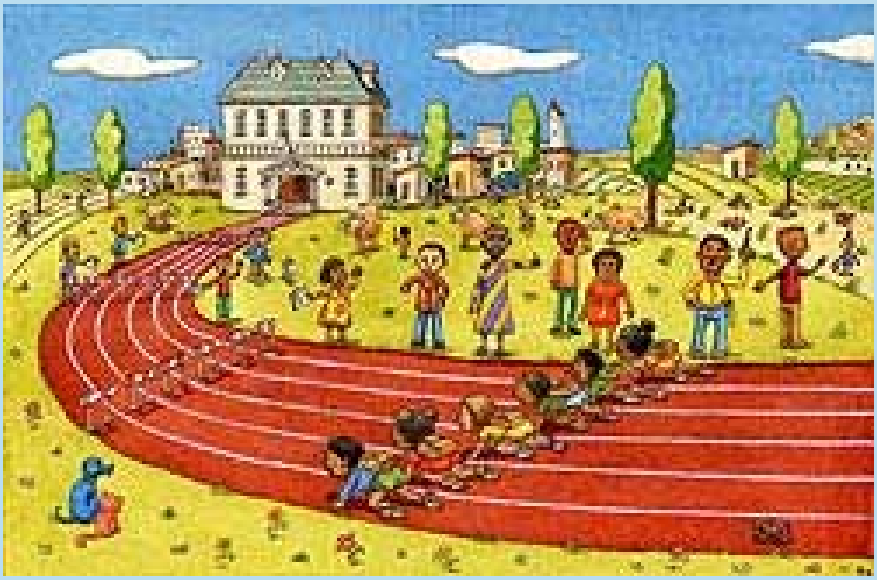
Elementary school at Sampubangin village Markham Valley.

Learn more about ECCE

For more in-depth information, a selection of resources available online from UNESCO.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What education for the young children?
UNESCO's quarterly bulletin on education devotes its July-September 2005 on how some countries, North and South, are seeking to expand their early childhood care education programmes.

Framework for action on values education in early childhood
Based on discussions at an international workshop, an overview of needs that must be taken into account for concerted action on quality education for the very young.

UNESCO Policy Brief on Early Childhood
A series of bi-monthly flash notes seeking to answer questions on the planning and implementation of early childhood policy issues. Many countries are featured.

UNESCO Early Childhood and Family Policy Series
Detailed analyses on specific policy options and reforms in the field of early childhood.

Early childhood development: laying the foundations of learning
How is basic learning laid in a young child's mind, not just as a way to succeed in school but to cope with the complexity of the world? A portfolio on the current state of research.

Toward a fair start for children: programming for early childhood care and development in the developing world
UNESCO's contribution to the 1990 World Summit for Children, this study highlights and promotes commitment at the highest level to the goals and strategies for child protection and development.

The Dakar Framework for Action: Education for All - Meeting our Collective Commitments
For details on each goal and strategy adopted at the 2000 World Education Forum in Senegal. The six regional frameworks for action are also included.

Early childhood education
A 1946 archive document presented to UNESCO by Alva Myrdal, calling for the creation of an international council on early childhood education. Mrs Myrdal later joined UNESCO's Department of Social Sciences and received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1982.

José Banaag

UNESCO and early childhood a timeline

Although UNESCO was involved in child education since its earliest years, the term "early childhood care and education" started in the 1980s.

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1948
The Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims that childhood is entitled to special care and assistance.

1950s to1960s
UNESCO supports the early childhood programmes of the World Organization for Early Childhood Education, which focuses on young children from age 0 to 8.

1971
For the first time in its programme and budget, UNESCO includes a set of early childhood education activities.

1979
Early childhood programmes are increasingly viewed as an issue beyond the scope of formal education. The Executive Board invites the Director-General to seek a comprehensive approach to the problems of the child within the Organization's fields of competence.

1981
A UNESCO-sponsored international consultation on pre-school education coins the term "early childhood care and education (ECCE)."

1983
The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development, of which UNESCO is a partner, is established. A consortium of international organizations, it emphasizes programmes in the developing world.

1984
A new five-year programme plan presents the promotion of early childhood education as a strategy contributing to the democratization of education.

1989
The General Conference adopts a new project on the young child and the family environment, in cooperation with UNICEF, WHO, the World Bank and relevant NGOs.

1989
The United Nations adopts the Convention on the Rights of the Child, recognizing that the best interests of the child must guide all actions concerning them.

1990
At the conclusion of a world conference on education for all in Jomtien (Thailand), a declaration confirms early childhood care and education as an essential component of basic education.

1998
A meeting between UNESCO and UNICEF pinpoints early childhood care and education as the first of seven priority areas for cooperation.

2000
At the World Education Forum in Dakar (Senegal), representatives of 181 countries adopt a Framework for Action, setting early childhood care and education as the first of six main goals of education for all.

José Banaag.

CONTACT

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